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STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL
AID/W FOR EE/AA (BOB WALLIN)

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TX](#)
SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: MEJLIS CHAIRMAN FOCUSES ON BUILDING
LOCAL GOVERNMENT CAPACITY

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: A delegation led by DRL Deputy Assistant Secretary Erica Barks-Ruggles discussed parliamentary reform

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December 7 with the chairman of Turkmenistan's Mejlis (Parliament), who focused her comments on the need to improve the capacity and capabilities of local government bodies in order to make them more self-sustaining and able to strategically plan. She was especially interested in learning more about how other former Soviet states have undertaken cooperative local government reform but was uninterested in parliamentary reform initiatives that would benefit the current Mejlis staff. She also offered little in the way of comment regarding a detailed parliamentary reform proposal USAID had put forward in October. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (SBU) A delegation led by DRL Deputy Assistant Secretary Erica Barks-Ruggles met with Mejlis Chairman Akja Nurberdiyeva on December 7 to discuss developments in the parliamentary body and to learn more about its plans in the coming year. Nurberdiyeva was lively and engaging and shared with the delegation some of the goals achieved thus far as well as the breadth of legislative work that is ongoing.

¶4. (SBU) The Chairman recounted the most significant projects the Mejlis has been occupied with, including legislation to promote agricultural development and efforts to help local government understand and implement legislation approved in Ashgabat. Nurberdiyeva described a program that the Mejlis is carrying out jointly with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to make local government bodies more functional, noting that regional government bodies do not understand -- and thus do not effectively apply -- laws passed by the central government. According to Nurberdiyeva, regional training seminars have already started, although they are complex programs that require a great deal of attention. Since President Berdimuhamedov declared the development of regional government to be a high priority, however, the Mejlis is giving the program the requisite attention it needs. She mentioned also that a legislative affairs exchange sponsored by UNDP at both the local and national levels of government with Latvia not long ago had been very useful because of Latvia's international grant experience and because the two countries shared a common experience as part of the former Soviet Union.

¶5. (SBU) When asked if U.S. legal experts might be of use in the country's efforts to reform, Nurberdiyeva focused almost exclusively on the goal of expanding the functionality of local government bodies. She said there is great interest in teaching local government bodies how to be more effective and self-governing. She added that local government needs to have its own agenda, understands strategic planning and budgeting, and needs to learn to manage its own operations at the grassroots level.

¶6. (SBU) According to Nurberdiyeva, while the Mejlis has already begun analyzing the resources and capabilities of local government, and is examining the experiences of model countries like Latvia, it is also very interested in identifying other countries with common histories and similar

conditions, in order to determine the best way forward. Delegation head Erica Barks-Ruggles asked USAID officials in the delegation from USAID and EUR/ACE to describe to Nurberdiyeva the type of assistance the U.S. government can provide, depending on the facet of local government the Mejlis wishes to focus on.

17. (SBU) USAID Regional Director Kim Delaney invited Turkmen officials to come to the United States and learn about how local governments operate there. She also noted

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that USAID has done similar work on the local level in both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Nurberdiyeva said Turkmenistan's government wants to change the way local governments operate so that local bodies can plan how to strategically manage the money they receive from the central government on their own. However, the chairman added, the current government structure is dependent on the center and is not self-sustaining. If local governments could become self-sustaining, they can build their own infrastructure. The government budgeted four billion dollars not long ago to improve infrastructure conditions in the regions, but local governments should be taught to manage their own resources and promote their own economic development, in part, so that youth there will have a reason to stay in rural areas.

18. (SBU) The delegation told Nurberdiyeva about the work that partner organizations like Counterpart are already doing in fifteen locations around the country to promote community empowerment. Such projects are on a small scale now, but could be expanded and made more robust with the inclusion of experts. Nurberdiyeva wanted to know more about local government-oriented programs, but also asked for information on the results of such programs after they have been implemented elsewhere. She mentioned a project that the Institute for Democracy and Human Rights had been involved in that looked good on paper, but that had had little to show for it ultimately, and no program evaluation opportunity at the end. She said they want to consider proposals with specific progress markers and a clear end goal.

19. (SBU) USAID reps said that such program information from other former Soviet states could be provided. They mentioned the success of one program in Kyrgyzstan, which had improved the local government's functionality to such a degree that it increased its tax revenues by some 20 percent. Nurberdiyeva interrupted saying the government is not looking for increased revenue as the result. It is most important, she said, to think strategically. People need to be taught how to catch fish rather than just be given fish.

10. (SBU) Nurberdiyeva said that, in the next six months, the Mejlis will be looking at a wide range of legislative areas that need reform: administrative procedures, the family code, the housing code, trade and maritime laws, the customs code, the lease law, and laws related to business and investment. The body will also review laws on the media and culture in the near term, and will look at possible reforms of Turkmenistan's legal, or bar association. Delegation members cited the U.S. government's track record in assisting other former Soviet states with legislative reform in the areas of tax, trade, investment and commercial codes, including overhauls of the entire code or just one segment of it.

11. (SBU) Nurberdiyeva indicated that there were specific segments of the laws where she would like to focus future cooperation. Growing interest in moving forward on economic development and drawing more foreign investment is creating new pressure for legal reform in these areas. The delegation said they would provide information from projects done in neighboring states, and also mentioned plans that are underway to establish an office in Turkmenistan that will make U.S. legal experts regularly available for consultation. Nurberdiyeva responded very positively to this.

12. (SBU) The delegation reminded Nurberdiyeva that USAID had sent a project proposal in late summer regarding direct parliamentary reform work with the Mejlis. She indicated that she had studied the proposal, but had not yet made any decisions. The delegation encouraged her to contact post for anything she needs regarding parliamentary reform.

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Nurberdiyeva said most of the proposals do not fit her needs -- she wants to focus any institutional reform agenda on the incoming Mejlis representatives who will be elected in December 2008, rather than on the staff who are in the Mejlis now. They have been engaged in Mejlis work for 15 years, and don't need training, she said.

13. (SBU) COMMENT: Nurberdiyeva appeared to be very enthusiastic about cooperating with U.S. organizations. That said, her stated interest in local government, her hesitation in responding to detailed USAID program proposals, and her disinterest in projects to train the current Mejlis staff show that she is quite clear on where she would be interested in cooperating.

14. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: It is also interesting to note

that this was the second time in one week that post officers received a message about making local government more "self-sustaining," (rather than "independent"). The second time this issue came up, it was included in a Neutralnyy Turkmenistan article about the delegation's meeting with the Central Election Commission. Although the topic was never raised by either side during the meeting, the article inaccurately reported that during the meeting, "it was emphasized that one of the most important tasks facilitating transformation is the formation in the country of an effective multi-level vertical line of authority by means of redistribution of power from the center to regional and local structures." Local government empowerment is a relatively new theme, so it will be interesting to see what priority the government assigns to this lofty task. In the meantime, we still await any firm response to our detailed proposals on possible programs. END COMMENT.

¶15. (U) DAS Barks-Ruggles cleared this cable.

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